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The "SUPER" project — named for the goals of creek Stabilization, Utility Protection and Environmental Restoration — is an updated and coalesced version of several years of studies and proposals that languished on county shelves for lack of funding.

Local, county, federal elected officials and a representative of the Army Corps of Engineers spoke about the revitalized project Wednesday afternoon at a press conference held on the bridge overlooking the creek in Aliso and Wood Canyons Regional Park.

"I was interested in this project for years when I was in the state legislature; now I am in a position to do something about it," said U.S. Congressman John Campbell, who has requested a federal appropriation for the project. "Right now, the creek is polluted — it can be pristine. Right now, there is non-native vegetation — it can be completely natural.

"Today is the start."

The first phase of the proposal includes the construction of a series of low structures in the creek and the reconnection of it to the natural flood plan. Creek sides will be shaved to reduce the steepness of the slopes, and invasive species of plants will be removed and replaced with native vegetation. Infrastructure protection will include locking the low flow channel in place with rock at the toe, with soil wraps above the rock.

Diversion of the low flows of Aliso Creek at the South Orange County Water Agency treatment plant to make the water salable for irrigation is also a goal.

Council members Elizabeth Pearson-Schneider and Toni Iseman lobbied intensively for Campbell's support for the cleanup project in a visit this spring to Washington, D.C.

County officials are hopeful that the support of Campbell and Congressman Ken Calvert, who also attended the press conference, will produce about 75% of the funding by the Army Corps of Engineers, leaving the county to come up with about \$11.25 million in nonfederal funding.

"Less than two years ago, it seemed we would never find a way to move forward in cleaning up this watershed," Orange County Supervisor Tom Wilson said. "What a difference a couple of years make! However, we would not be here without the cooperation of the Corps and the [Environmental Protection Agency], the support of our congressmen, the perseverance of our local stakeholders and the support and assistance of the Athens Group."

Wilson also recognized the presence of members of the South Laguna Civic Assn., Surfriders Foundation, Coastkeeper and My Ocean.

"I am so pleased to have reached this extremely significant milestone," Wilson said.

Environmentalists at the press conference were not so pleased.

"We are opposed to this," said Penny Elia, speaking for a list of environmental groups that comprise Voices of the Wilderness, a coalition of environmental organizations formed to protect the park from threats of development that include Sierra Club, Village Laguna and Laguna Greenbelt Inc., as well as the Surfriders and South Laguna Civic Assn. mentioned by Wilson.

"We weren't even invited to the press conference," Elia said.

But she came prepared.

Elia handed out an information sheet listing 10 questions, including how the county plans to safely excavate for the 24 proposed concrete drop structures, export the dredged dirt and import concrete through the park.

"This is a pig in a poke," South Laguna resident Betsy Bredau said. "I think it is a flood control project to benefit one private property owner, using tax dollars."

She was referring to the Aliso Creek Golf Course, which has suffered in the past from flooding, now owned by developer partner Athens Group and Montage Resort & Spa.

"This is all very good news for the watershed and for us as a stakeholder," Athens Group Vice President John Mansour said at the press briefing.

"Athens Group projects are not in the county's jurisdiction; that's up to the city," said Larry McKenney, manager of the county's Resources and Development Management Department. "I don't believe their support for the project is with expectations of flood control."

Aliso Creek meanders for 11 miles from the Saddleback foothills to South Laguna picking up pollution all along the watershed and spewing it onto the sand at Aliso Beach.

The SUPER project is proposed as a collaborative effort that includes the cities and four special districts in the watershed. It is in no way expected to replace the good management practices by the communities and districts in the watershed, also a multimillion-dollar effort, Kenney said.

"This is a new day," Pearson-Schneider said. "My colleague, Toni Iseman, and I will work together with the six upstream communities."

Iseman said the cleanup requires not only the will of Laguna, but the cooperation of the other cities and districts, as well as county and federal resources, including the Corps of Engineers.

The corps has hitherto been prohibited from directly addressing the pressing problem of bacteria in the creek because pollution issues are under the jurisdiction of the EPA.

Corps Colonel Alex Dornstauber said Wednesday that Aliso Creek could be the proving ground for a new agreement with the EPA that would allow the Corps to be directly involved in the resolution of water-quality programs. Congressional approval of the project would permit the corps to pay for water-quality treatment to ensure that creek water is clean before it flows onto Aliso Beach.

"Dornstauber spent a year in Iraq, and he did a great job there," Calvert said. "And he's going to do a great job cleaning up this creek."

Figuring the Corps' share of the project at about \$30 million of the estimated \$45 million cost, the county will pursue grants and contributions from stakeholders for the rest. Athens Group is expected to participate in the funding, McKenney said. The county also has applied for a Prop 50 grant, which would bring in \$5 million.

The county will be the lead local agency on the project and will coordinate the local collaboration of cities, water districts, property owners, nongovernmental advocacy groups and other stakeholders.

Stakeholder support, particularly among elected officials, will be crucial to secure full funding for the project, McKenney said. The project can be done in phases as funding is available, he said.

"It will be great in a few years to stand here and announce the completion of this project," Campbell said.